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SUBJECT: KAZAKHSTAN - ALMATY NOTES, JUNE 23 - JULY 4, 2008

¶1. The "Almaty Notes" series is intended to maintain focus on developments in civil society, the media, and the opposition in Kazakhstan's "southern capital" following the move of the Embassy to Astana.

Opposition Parties Propose Legislation

¶2. On June 24, the opposition Azat party and National Social Democratic Party (OSDP) went public with their own specific proposals for amending Kazakhstan's legislation on elections, political parties, the media, and freedom of assembly. The parties explained that their aim was to advance implementation of Kazakhstan's Madrid commitments on democratic reform. According to Azat leader Bulat Abilov, "seven months have passed since Kazakhstan's bid for the OSCE chairmanship was approved, but no legislative changes have yet been introduced to parliament; if the Madrid commitments are not fulfilled, the reputation of the country will be damaged."

Abilov Comments on Nazarbayev Speech

¶3. Azat leader Abilov also commented on President Nazarbayev's June 29 address to the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly session in Astana, in which Nazarbayev publicly discussed the Madrid commitments for the first time. "We learned nothing new from the President's speech, but do not doubt that a 'two-party system' will be introduced in parliament," Abilov said. Abilov contended that with two parties in parliament, 90 per cent of the seats would in any event wind up in the hands of Nazarbayev's Nur Otan party. As a result, the government would control parliament just as it has previously.

Aldamzharov Joins Communist Party

¶4. Gaziz Aldamzharov has joined the Communist Party and has been elected to its leadership as a party secretary. From 1998 to 2001, Aldamzharov was Deputy Chairman of the opposition Republican People's Party of Kazakhstan, which was founded by former Prime Minister Akezhan Kazhegeldin. In 2003, Aldamzharov left the opposition and was appointed by President Nazarbayev to be Kazakhstan's ambassador to Belarus.

Hunger Strike Ended

¶5. On June 21, a group of Almaty residents ended a two-week hunger strike which they had initiated to protest an effort to seize their property to build more lucrative residences. Following negotiations with representatives of a local construction company, they reached an agreement on satisfactory compensation for their homes. A separate hunger strike ended a week earlier, when the Almaty city administration reversed a plan to seize the land of another group of residents.

New District in Almaty

16. On June 2, the Almaty city maslikhat (legislature) approved Almaty mayor Akmetzhan Yesimov's decision to establish a new city district (rayon) which will include illegally-constructed settlements on the city's outskirts. According to the Interfax news agency, in the past, the city administration held an uncompromising position toward houses illegally constructed by rural migrants, which included attempts by the city to demolish such dwellings. However, Yesimov holds a different position. His administration plans to develop the infrastructure of the new district and to resolve the socio-economic problems of its residents.

Almaty City Administration Discusses Problems

17. At a June 27 city government meeting, Almaty mayor Yesimov harshly criticized his subordinates, accusing them of failing to be proactive in dealing with issues like public protests. He argued that the incitement of inter-ethnic hatred in Almaty was an urgent problem, with some individuals attempting to exacerbate social tensions. Almaty's deputy mayor cited other problems, such as migration and new religions. Since 1991, he contended, the number of religious associations in the city has increased twelve-fold, and the activities of some of them are quite dubious. The city prosecutor agreed that there has been an escalation in inter-ethnic tensions. He added that over the past 18 months, law enforcement officials have recorded 12 cases of dissemination of "extremist literature."

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